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GERALDINE BONNER

THE STORY

PROLOGUE—While dependent over the enforced hiding of her fiancé, Jim Dallas, slayer in self-defense of Homer Parkinson, member of an influential family, Sybil Saunders, popular actress, is engaged to play "Night" on Gull Island, on the Maine coast. In the company are Sybil's bosom friend, Anne Tracy; Anne's brother Joe, young warden; and Alton Stokes, an actor infatuated with Sybil.

CHAPTER I—After the play, which is a big hit, Wally Sybil, official photographer, learns something of the jealous, professional and otherwise, existing in the company.

CHAPTER II—Hugh Bassett, director of the play, and Anne Tracy's fiancé, tells Joe he has heard he is spying on Sybil. In an effort to learn the whereabouts of Jim Dallas and earn the reward offered by the Parkinson family, the boy's denial is not convincing.

CHAPTER III—Joe Tracy is arranging for a vacation trip to Gull Island. He tells Sybil he has news of Jim Dallas, and to secure the necessary privacy they arrange to meet in a small summer house near the main building.

CHAPTER IV—The sound of a pistol shot startles the assembled company. Investigation shows a revolver has been taken from a desk in the library. Flora Stokes' wife bursts in with the announcement that Sybil has been shot and her body carried off by the swift tide that races by the island.

CHAPTER V—Flora Stokes tells Bassett she saw Sybil shot but did not see the murderer. Bassett notifies the sheriff, Abel Williams, and arrives with Rawson, district attorney, and a man called Patrick. All the company is accepted for the exception of Joe Tracy, presumably on his trip. Flora gives her evidence, and the authorities arrange so that no one can leave the island.

CHAPTER VI—Discussing the tragedy with Rawson and Bassett, Williams voices the opinion that Sybil is the guilty person, the deed being actuated by jealousy. While they are talking, the sound of a crash in the living room makes them hasten there.

CHAPTER VII—Anne Tracy, shocked at her friend's awful death, is also uneasy about Joe. Remembering his rage against Sybil, and realizing she is not sure he left the island, she imagines pictures him as Sybil's murderer, and hiding in the house, the upper story of which is unoccupied. Seeking to inform him of the close watch kept, she descends to the living room. There she dimly sees a man, who disappears, and try to escape. He disappears, and in her agitation she knocks over a lamp. She tells the three men she came downstairs for a book, and her explanation is accepted.

CHAPTER VIII—In the summer house the investigators find evidence that Sybil has been there, and knowing of Stokes' infatuation, Rawson and Williams at once suspect him of the murder.

CHAPTER IX—Stokes denies all knowledge of the crime, and deftly throws suspicion on Joe. Rawson, somewhat impressed by the story put forward by Stokes, goes to the mainland to investigate Joe's movements.

CHAPTER X—Tortured by her thoughts, Anne visits the unoccupied upper story, seeking Joe, but finds nothing. Rawson returns with information that young Tracy had not left the island. Suspicion is at once turned toward him, and arrangements are made for a search of the top story of the building, about the only spot on the island where a person could find a hiding place. Rawson and Williams return, having found no trace of Joe, or anybody else, in the upper part of the building.

stairs. It struck upon her ear, heavy and quick, a man's step, and she remained as she was, her arms lifted, her eyes staring into her reflected eyes in the mirror. She stood thus till it stopped at her door. When the knock came and Rawson's voice spoke her name, the hands dropped and she moved to the door.

"Can you come downstairs for a minute?" the voice said, low and guarded. "I'm sorry to ask you to get up."

She opened the door. "I hadn't gone to bed. Yes, of course I'll come. You want to—"

"Just ask you a few more questions. I'm glad I didn't wake you." She followed him along the passage and down the stairs. When she entered the library her glance fell on Bassett facing her across the room, his brows drawn low over the dark trouble of his eyes. His look told her of anxiety, apprehension, and a passionate concern for her.

Williams indicated an armchair near the desk. "Take a seat, Miss Tracy. Sorry we've had to call you down."

She fell into it and, as the men settled themselves in theirs, ran her tongue along her dry lips and took a deep breath of air into her lungs.

"We've been making some inquiries about your brother, Miss Tracy," Rawson began. "About his leaving here. You told us, as I remember, that you knew he went."

"Why, yes, he went."

"No—I didn't see the boat go, I was upstairs, but of course he went."

"We've found out that he didn't," said Rawson. "Mr. Rawson's seen Gabriel. Bassett spoke very gently. 'And he says he didn't take Joe over.'"

"But I don't understand. He was ready. I said good-bye to him. It was his holiday. He'd been looking forward to it, he was crazy to go."

"And he told you he was going, wanted to go. Was he jolly and good-humored like a person starting on a holiday?"

"Yes—he thought of him. It was what he'd been looking to do for years. After I left him I went to my room and dressed, and when I went downstairs I saw that his bag and fishing rod, which he told me he'd left by the entrance, were gone and I thought of course he was. And he has, he's gone some other way."

"You're sure he's gone?" Rawson's emphasis on "you're" was heavy.

She looked at him with startled eyes. "Yes, aren't you? Why, you don't think he's here?"

Rawson addressed Bassett: "Didn't you tell me he was to stop tonight in Bangor and meet his friend?"

"Yes—they were to start out in the morning."

"Where were they staying?"

"Some hotel. I don't know the name. Do you remember it, Anne?"

She shook her head. "No. If he told me I've forgotten. I've no idea what it was."

"Hold on a minute," said Williams, stretching out his hand. "Shine spoke to me about that. He was asking about a hotel in Bangor young Tracy recommended—the Algonquin Inn. That may be it."

Rawson swung the desk, chair round and drew the telephone to him.

"We can find out in a minute," they sat without moving while Rawson made the connection.

"Is there a Mr. Tracy there—Joe Tracy?" And then a period of listening, punctuated with grunts of assent from Rawson. Then, "Mr. Travers has gone—left on the six-fifteen this evening—I see." A silent stretch and a final "Thanks—that's all I wanted. Much obliged." The receiver clicked into

its hook, and Rawson swung the chair toward them.

"Travers has been waiting since last night. Tracy never showed up. Travers had no message from him, and left this evening for Moosehead Lake."

"For a moment there was no comment. Anne raised her eyes, the sides of the room looked a long way off and the light seemed to have intensified to a violent glare as if she were sitting in the midst of a dazzling illumination.

"I don't know what to make of that," she said, the words dropping slowly with spaces between.

"Neither do we, Miss Tracy," said Rawson, and leaning back, his hands clasped over his stomach, he gazed intently at her through his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Yes, you do," she said, and changed. "You've made something of it already. And what you've made is lies—wicked lies."

Then she had seen it. Bassett made a step forward, but she leaped to her feet, oblivious of him.

"You think he did it, just because you can't find him. That's all he's done, gone away. You must be crazy. What would he do it for? Don't you have to have a reason to commit murder?"

"They weren't good friends. I don't know why—I asked her, but she wouldn't tell me. And what was it—a quarrel, a grievance? But that wouldn't make him want to kill her!"

"I've told them that, Anne," Bassett implored; "there's no use going over it."

Rawson leaned suddenly forward and caught her by the wrist. "But did you see last night in the living room?"

If he had meant to surprise her he failed of his purpose. She hung back from his grip and said with defiant emphasis: "I saw nothing!"

"Are you sure it was a book you came down for?"

"It was a book, as I told you." "You could read a few hours after your friend was murdered?"

"I could try to read—it was better than thinking."

"You've got a pretty cool head, Miss Tracy," he added, and relinquished her hand. She fell back in her chair as if his hold upon her had been all that sustained her in an upright position. He rose, looking down at her, curious and unsatisfied.

"I guess we'll call a halt for a while. We've other work to attend to. But wait here till we come back; we may have to do some more talking." He turned to Williams and gave a jerk of his head toward the hall. "Come on, we'll go up there now."

He walked to the door, Williams following him. As it shut after her chair, she went to her feet and over her chair, she held him off with a hand on his breast and whispered: "Where are they going?"

"Upstairs, to the top story." She clutched the lapels of his coat. "He's there, he's up there."

"Joe!" Bassett stared into her eyes. He thought her sobs were giving way.

"Anne, darling, what's the matter? We may have to do some more talking." "I said what wasn't true—he's there."

He caught her arms and drew her to her feet. "What do you mean?"

"I know it, I've seen him." "Seen Joe himself?"

"Last night when I came down for the book. He's hiding up there—I thought he was safe. And now they'll find him."

"I saw the launch go without him and I was going to speak to you, but Shine was there and I couldn't. Then she was killed and I didn't know what to think, where he'd gone, anything! But that night I heard them say there was a man on guard at the causeway, and I came down to tell him in case he was here and would try to get across. And then I saw him."

"Where?"

"In the living room. He came from the door into the kitchen wing and I whispered it."

ing she told him of her visit to the top floor.

"Will you help me?" she whispered. "Will you help me whatever happens?"

He nodded, there was no time now for words. He motioned her to sit down, and moved back from her, listening to steps which were crossing the living room, entering the hall. Were they louder than they had been going up, were there three pair of feet where there had been two? They stopped at the door; it opened and Rawson and Williams entered.

Rawson spoke to Anne: "You can go upstairs, Miss Tracy. We'll put off the rest of our talk till tomorrow. You better try to get some rest. And kindly remember to stay in your room. I don't want any mistakes about that tonight."

She murmured words of compliance and rising with pale composure left the library.

When the door shut on her Bassett said: "You got nothing up there at all?"

"No—nothing," answered Rawson. "But we were at a disadvantage; not enough light, and it's a good-sized place. We'll comb it over tomorrow morning by daylight. Of course he could have got out on the island—all that kitchen person kept open. He might have been lying low up there all yesterday and have come down last night. All quite possible, but—well—we'll know tomorrow." He walked to the window and looked out. "Dark as a pocket!" He turned to Bassett. "When the tide's full out costs a person get across that channel except by the causeway?"

"There are places where they might swim the stream in the middle. It's a deep, strong current, but a good swimmer could do it."

"He might try to wait for me, pretty keen about getting off here. You know this shoreline. Suppose you go down and take up a station below the boathouse among those Juniper bushes. That's a place a person might use as a sheltered start for a getaway. You can't see, but you can hear. Take Williams' gun, and if there's a sound, challenge. If there's no answer, shoot. I'll come down with you. I want to take a look at Patrick and I'll stay round myself for a while."

He stopped to the sill of the window, but Williams, feeling for his revolver, stopped him.

"Hold on a minute. I got an idea that I think'll help a bit. I've been thinking of it all day and I'm not mistaken it'll land your man or your woman nearer and easier than lying in wait for them outside where they know by this time we've got a guard."

Rawson turned back into the room.

"Let's hear it—we want to clear this up tonight. But, Mr. Bassett, you go on. Stop and tell Patrick on the job. I'll be down with him later, unless Williams' idea opens up something new."

Bassett took the revolver and stepped out of the window.

He reached the boathouse and groped his way about it to find Patrick. Coming round the angle where the man was stationed he pronounced his name and was surprised to get no answer. He stretched a feeling hand which came in contact with a large warm bulk, immovable under his touch.

And giving a sound of heavy, regular breathing. His own breathing stifled, his movements noiseless as a cat, he struck a match and, sheltering it with his curved hand, held it out. In its glow he saw Patrick huddled on the bench, his shoulders hunched against the wall, his head dropped forward in profound sleep.

Pressed against the wall, he calculated the distances about him. The approach to the causeway was to his right, an incline of rocky steps, and in the stillness he could hear the lightest foot descending them. On such a venture if his nerve still held. If he did, it would be within the next hour, and if Patrick slept and Rawson did not come he would go by unchallenged.

A fitful breeze arose, carrying sea odors. He heard the murmurs of the tide growing lower, fainter, till they sank to silence, and he knew the bed of the channel was uncovered.

(To Be Continued)

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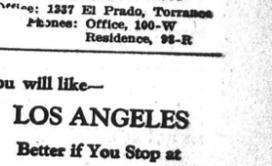
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